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IS MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHING A FAILURE?

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Probably the greatest value of egotism is to prevent us from becoming pessimists. Within limits a certain amount of egotism is essential. We all despise the conceited prig; he sees excellence only in himself. We feel pity for the man who has no respect for his own worth and the dignity of his calling, or who is always dwelling on faults and failures. He lacks perspective. He never surveys his work from a distance, and therefore unfits himself to be a fair and honest judge. Every man who is attempting a work worth the doing should bring to his task a mind sufficiently poised to enable him to judge calmly the value of his labor.

These general truths hold good in education as well as in other professions. Amid the changes in method and requirement, amid the criticism from many quarters, it is necessary not to become discouraged, but to face the problems as they arise, and seek to solve them. What is more, in moments of despondency a writer should not draw conclusions universally valid from the experience of himself and a few others, particularly when widely inductive facts are at hand. Such conclusions are extremely likely to mislead, especially if colored with personal bias, or affected by conditions which do not measure up to an impossible ideal.

Such in brief is the judgment of one reader, after a careful perusal of Professor Grandgent's interesting paper in the September issue of the *School Review*. This article deserves much praise. Its style is pleasing, even fascinating at times; its logic, granting the premises, is convincing; and it states with unusual force and clearness many old and new truths. The whole discussion, however, is based upon the assumption that modern-

language teaching is a failure. An appeal to individual experience constitutes the only ground of this assumption; no statistics, no generally accepted facts to prove, or to tend to prove, such a proposition are brought forward. Having thus assumed that modern-language teaching is a failure. Professor Grandgent explains why it fails, and what remedies should be applied to secure as good results in the modern languages as in the classics. Now a teacher may have too exalted an ideal, may expect too much of his students; or his memories of early attainments in the classics may become magnified with passing years; or he may fail to compare, statistically, the results of examinations in several departments. In a discussion of this kind individual experience and the personal equation of the teacher should largely be eliminated; we must seek other and surer premises upon which to base our conclusions.

Fortunately the data for a comparison of the preparation for college in the modern languages and in the classics is at hand. In the number of papers examined, in the territorial distribution of the candidates, in the number of years covered, in the standard of the examinations, in the thoroughness and fairness of marking the papers—in all that goes to make up a thorough test of students' ability and knowledge, in all these conditions the data of which we make use are unquestioned. The examinations of the college-entrance examination board are accepted by nearly every college in the United States, and the results of these examinations have been most carefully tabulated and published. We may therefore regard as authoritative the testimony which these records give us; for it is presumed that the examinations in all subjects are equally representative and difficult, and that a mark of 90 per cent. in Latin stands for the same degree of proficiency, according to the interpretation of the requirements, as 90 per cent. in German. To this I believe everyone acquainted with the facts will readily assent; otherwise the board's questions would be faulty and partial. But any objection is silenced by the wide acceptance of these examinations. Further, if we take these records, not for one year only, but for a number of years, we eliminate any objec-

tions that may arise from the shortcomings of one examination, and thus our conclusions have much greater validity.

TABLE I

| | Year | Number Examined | 90-100 per cent. Ratings | 75-89 per cent. Ratings | 60-74 per cent. Ratings | 50-59 per cent. Ratings | 60-100 per cent. Ratings | 50-100 per cent. Ratings |
|-------------|------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Greek..... | 1903 | 1,006 | 7.0 | 27.7 | 31.1 | 7.8 | 64.8 | 72.6 |
| | 1904 | 917 | 10.6 | 26.7 | 29.3 | 8.6 | 67.6 | 76.3 |
| | 1905 | 1,045 | 7.2 | 26.9 | 29.2 | 9.0 | 63.3 | 72.2 |
| | 1906 | 1,083 | 3.4 | 20.9 | 29.5 | 9.5 | 53.7 | 63.3 |
| | 1907 | 1,082 | 9.1 | 28.1 | 27.0 | 10.6 | 64.2 | 74.9 |
| Latin..... | 1903 | 3,860 | 3.9 | 16.4 | 29.3 | 12.7 | 49.4 | 62.2 |
| | 1904 | 4,117 | 5.9 | 25.6 | 30.8 | 10.3 | 62.6 | 72.9 |
| | 1905 | 5,066 | 5.8 | 25.8 | 31.1 | 8.4 | 62.8 | 71.2 |
| | 1906 | 5,693 | 3.4 | 17.5 | 29.0 | 10.0 | 49.9 | 59.9 |
| | 1907 | 6,101 | 3.4 | 15.4 | 29.1 | 13.6 | 47.9 | 61.5 |
| German..... | 1903 | 964 | 6.9 | 24.5 | 35.9 | 9.7 | 68.1 | 78.6 |
| | 1904 | 1,045 | 5.6 | 25.2 | 35.9 | 10.6 | 65.9 | 75.6 |
| | 1905 | 1,235 | 6.8 | 29.1 | 31.7 | 12.2 | 67.6 | 79.8 |
| | 1906 | 1,260 | 2.9 | 23.3 | 34.7 | 14.2 | 66.8 | 75.0 |
| | 1907 | 1,629 | 4.7 | 22.5 | 30.1 | 15.0 | 75.3 | 72.3 |
| French..... | 1903 | 964 | 1.3 | 15.0 | 33.8 | 14.9 | 50.2 | 65.0 |
| | 1904 | 1,046 | 2.7 | 17.1 | 32.7 | 15.7 | 52.7 | 68.4 |
| | 1905 | 1,185 | 2.2 | 19.2 | 28.8 | 18.9 | 50.2 | 69.1 |
| | 1906 | 1,295 | 2.2 | 15.7 | 39.3 | 16.4 | 57.1 | 73.6 |
| | 1907 | 1,681 | 2.2 | 3.6 | 32.1 | 13.3 | 51.2 | 64.6 |

The accompanying Table I is taken from the reports of the secretary of the examination board for the years 1903-7 inclusive. Especial attention is called to the ratings above 60 per cent., and those of 90-100 per cent. The one gives us the number generally accepted as prepared for college; the other indicates the highest quality of preparation. So far as the number of pupils who are capable of passing the entrance examinations is concerned, German ranks higher than any other subject under consideration. Greek comes next, while French takes precedence of Latin, winning out by a considerable margin in three of the five years. Certainly this does not look like poor instruction in French and German, or that modern-language teaching is a failure. Right here is where the value of reliable and widely inductive statistics comes in, for the average teacher,

out of respect for the past and its traditions, would readily admit that the classics are better taught than the modern languages. This point has been admirably discussed by Professor Grandgent. Now, I am a teacher of the classics myself, and believe most profoundly in their educational value; but there is no escape from the conclusion, drawn from an examination of so many thousands of papers, that the modern-language teachers are doing their work a little better than the teachers of the classics.

So far we have taken into account only the ratings above 60 per cent. We now turn to the ratings of 90-100 per cent., which is the test of the highest quality of teaching. Here we find the order of excellence is reversed; Greek is ahead of German, while Latin stands higher than French; German has a very decided lead over Latin in every year but one, while French is very low indeed.

Having established the two facts that pupils are as well prepared in German as in Greek, and that the general preparation in French is superior to that in Latin, the remainder of this paper is devoted to finding out the reasons why advanced French makes such a poor showing. With this in view I have prepared the accompanying Table II giving the 90-100 per cent. ratings for 1903-7 inclusive, of such subjects as are generally taught during the last year of high school, omitting mathematics. In any consideration of this table we must keep before us the different requirements in the modern languages and in the classics. In the latter the examinations are partly on the work prepared in the classroom, and partly on sight translation; in the latter the translation is of passages which the student is not expected to have read. This in itself makes the classical examination much the easier. Add to this the greater difficulty of the prose composition, and we find that the modern-language examination is relatively, i. e., in proportion to the years of preparation, very hard. But more of this later. The chief thing to remember is that, inasmuch as the modern-language paper includes sight translation and prose composition, we must also include sight translation and prose composition in forming our estimate of the quality of work done in the ancient languages.

TABLE II

| | 1903 | 1904 | 1905 | 1906 | 1907 | |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------------------------|
| English..... | 4.5 | 4.0 | 1.2 | 2.0 | 2.3 | |
| History..... | 2.9 | 2.6 | 2.4 | 4.8 | 3.1 | |
| Adv. French..... | | | | 1.9 | 2.7 | |
| Adv. German..... | 10.6 | | 1.7 | 1.7 | 1.8 | |
| <i>Aeneid</i> i-vi and sight translation..... | | | | 0.0 | 0.0 | Not offered until 1906 |
| Adv. Latin composition | 1.5 | 2.1 | 0.5 | 1.1 | 0.7 | |
| Greek (<i>Iliad</i> i-iii) | 3.3 | 18.9 | 3.8 | 1.5 | 9.7 | |
| Greek composition..... | 7.3 | 7.4 | 3.9 | 1.5 | 4.1 | |
| Greek sight translation of poetry..... | | | 1.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | Not offered until 1905 |
| <i>Aeneid</i> i-vi..... | 5.1 | 6.1 | 3.6 | 2.8 | 2.4 | |

From Table II it is clear that Greek takes precedence of German for three of the five years, while Latin is ahead of German in one year only—1904. But turning to a comparison of Latin and French, it is a curious fact that during the years 1903–5, no candidate in advanced French received the rating of 90 per cent. Yet we find this interesting situation; that for the years 1906 and 1907 the percentage of ratings above 90 per cent. has been higher in French than in Latin. It is also an interesting fact, and one worthy of serious and careful investigation, that the total percentage of 90–100 ratings has fallen off very materially—about 35 per cent.—since the first examinations of the board. Now, these facts clearly prove two things: first, that the teaching of French has greatly improved during the past few years; and secondly, that instruction in the classics has not held its own, a condition which holds true of several other subjects as well.

A cursory glance at the other two subjects given in the table will show that history has held its own, while English has lost nearly 50 per cent. Why should this be?

It seems to us, in justice to the teachers of French, that a comparison between the requirements in Latin and in French might well be made. If it can be shown that the requirement for advanced French is much more rigid than for Latin, then the teachers of French deserve very great credit for their excellent showing in the examinations of the past two years.

I. THE DIFFICULTIES OF MODERN AND ANCIENT LANGUAGES

In discussing this point, Professor Grandgent says:

Our modern languages are fully as hard as the ancient, and require to be studied just as industriously. I do not believe there is or ever was a language more difficult to acquire than the French; most of us can name worthy persons who have been assiduously struggling with it from childhood to mature age, and do not know it now; yet it is treated as something one can pick up offhand.

This is a most excellent comparison of the difficulties. To learn a language so as to write it rapidly, to speak it fluently, and to translate it readily and idiomatically, all in three years' study, giving only one-fourth of the school time to that language is certainly a most remarkable feat. And when that language is fully as difficult as either Latin or Greek the performance of the teacher who succeeds in having his pupils attain a higher standard than the pupils who study Latin attain is certainly worthy of all commendation.

II. QUANTITY OF WORK REQUIRED

It is only fair to compare the third-year work in Latin with the third year of French. During this year seven orations of Cicero and possibly 2,000 lines of Ovid are usually read, making in all about 150 pages. Now the French requirement is from 400 to 600 pages, or from three to four times as many pages. But what of the thoroughness of the work done? An effort must be made to have the quality equally good with the Latin.

In respect to composition, there can be no comparison, the French being far and away the more difficult. The unusual words are much oftener supplied in the Latin examinations. How many Latin teachers could translate into Latin a selection from Irving's *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, and write a letter of from 100 to 200 words describing the recent earthquake in San Francisco? I venture the assertion that even after years of study in secondary school and college, after teaching the subject to many classes, not 1 per cent. of the Latin teachers could obtain the rating of 90-100 per cent. in such a text. And yet the French pupils are expected to be able to do so after three years of study.

But this is not all. Our pupil in French must, as we have seen, read three or four times as many pages, must be far more proficient in composition, but he must also do what is not attempted in Latin, namely, carry on an ordinary conversation in French, attend recitations in which the language of the classroom is French, understand explanations of difficult points of syntax, and reply in French. This is reaching a point of excellence to which few if any Latin professors outside of the priesthood attain.

In consideration of the vastly more difficult and diversified requirement in French, the marvel is, not that better results are not obtained, for they are equally good if not better than in Latin, but that any pupil is able to pass the advanced French examinations. Great credit is certainly due the modern-language teachers, for they are doing a most excellent work. What is sadly needed is a restatement and abridgement of the modern-language requirement, with an agreement upon the authors to be read. The classical course gains its disciplinary value from its solidarity. If modern-language teachers could once reach a fair degree of unanimity among themselves as to what to teach, they would greatly enhance the value, both linguistic and disciplinary, of their subjects.